

University of Dundee

The Scientific Muse

Wyvern Poets; McCallum, Bet; Canning, Roy; Prescott, Ann; McKenzie, Roddie ; Cameron, Gavin

DOI:

[10.20933/100001224](https://doi.org/10.20933/100001224)

Publication date:

2021

Licence:

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wyvern Poets, McCallum, B., Canning, R., Prescott, A., McKenzie, R., Cameron, G., Robertson, G. C., Petrie, A., Neville, R., Williams, K. (Ed.), Williams, F., & O'Brien, A. (2021). *The Scientific Muse: Poems for Robert Duncan Milne*. University of Dundee. <https://doi.org/10.20933/100001224>

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Wyvern Poets

A stylized illustration of a man with a mustache, wearing a black top hat and a dark coat with a white collar and a brown tie. He is holding a golden sphere with several thin, yellow antennae-like structures extending from it. The background is dark grey.

The Scientific Muse

Poems for Robert Duncan Milne

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The Wyvern Poets

In association with the Being Human Festival of the
Humanities and the Centre for Scottish Culture at the School
of Humanities, University of Dundee

UniVerse

With grateful acknowledgements to Peter Marshall, Roy Canning and Wyvern Poets, Daniel Cook, Chris Murray, Faye Williams and the spirit of Robert Duncan Milne.

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Cover designs and illustrations: Faye Williams.

Front cover illustration of Robert Duncan Milne holding his 'Eidoloscope': Amy O'Brien.

Back cover shows the only known photograph of Robert Duncan Milne.

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Introduction

Welcome to the sixth collection by Wyvern Poets, in collaboration with the University of Dundee. This booklet for Dundee's Being Human festival programme on the theme of 'Renewal' celebrates the life and work of Cupar-born Robert Duncan Milne (1844-99). Milne published around sixty Science Fiction stories (some multi-part or novella length), mostly in the *Argonaut* and the *San Francisco Examiner* between 1879 and 1899. He pioneered SF themes such as climate catastrophe, cryogenics, molecular re-engineering of the body, personality transfer, scientific terrorism and drone warfare, remote surveillance and telecommunications, satellite phones and technologies for visual time travel which anticipate cinema and TV. Scotland appears to punch below its weight in relation to early science fiction, yet Milne is an extraordinary lost presence who slipped through the cracks of the canon by a series of historical accidents - until now.

For a recent article about the transatlantic importance of Milne's writing and our plans to republish it, see:

<https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/nostalgia/1900144/cupars-victorian-sci-fi-pioneer-who-imagined-our-world-then-vanished-in-time/>

Keith Williams
University of Dundee

Post Apocalypse

memory of an awful brightness
comets cross the inner eye
vertigo, deafness,
red sand wilderness and slide of landscape
memory of the gravest choice
a button pressed and worlds dissolved
memory of the fall, the fracture
in reeking clouds, I foundered
lost her

echo of her quieting voice
her Venus shape and siren-song...

...comes a wind, astringent, alien
reflected and refracted light plays
with sand grains hot and radiant
and comes my love
a floating copy
she's hornblende, feldspar, mica, clay
but unexpected aerohaptics
in jets of air revive her touch
recharge her kiss.

Bet McCallum

Body and Soul

(from the short story
'Baron Von Steinbach's Soul')

Sitting opposite
close enough to touch
body and soul bound
in isolation, or should
I say alienation, as the
dialectics melt away.
The soul transported
to another material self
to 'stray dogs' that are
exterminated within
Dante's circles of hell.
The body transformed
brow and butt lifted
cleft removed
skin tags and spider
veins cleansed
a perfect form.

Roy Canning

Moon Dust

This is the fifth Dark Cycle of the shift.
and still the lanthanide elements remain
tight locked in their lunar ores.

Time is strictly Greenwich.

Enrichment has gifted us an ancient city, set under
overcast skies, with just a clever hint of rain.

The laboratories are never augmented:
optimal illumination, a whiff of ammonia.
All maintained at twenty degrees centigrade,
one hundred kilopascals, terraform normal.
Resignedly we adopt our viewing stations,
inured to our monochrome world.
Except, today, one, no two, no *all* the vessels contain
hair-like threads, bright red, coiling, writhing.

Later, much later, I get a port to myself.
I watch the new Earth, an arc of indigo blue
that negates the blackness. Soothed by its
reflected light, I dream of what might be.

Ann Prescott

A New Palingenesis* Redux

Milne's Plot: A physician chemically dissolves his dying wife's body in order to reconstitute it using her spirit's captured electrical intelligence in a new youthful body.

On the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the death
that you staggered intoxicated into,
with that street car named destroyer;
our quantum computer perfected bending space-time
- a reinvention of your *eidoloscope* - and so we captured
the exact moment of your mangling,
recovering your complete cranium
still fizzing with nerve impulses and beamed it up
from your truncated and vermillion-fountaining body
to our lab in a future, that you astonishingly, imagined.
The MRI copied your connectome, the electrical road map,
of your mind, which the induction engine uploaded:
brainwaves, synapse map and all of your lost highways along
with your evanescent electrical activity to an AI.
When asked, in your new home, you completed three... and counting,
collections of short stories.
Imaginative as ever they were, but somehow,
lack your former knack for illuminating human dilemmas.
Of course, this may be due to a bug in your program
or the burden of captivity, but we don't talk about that.
We have not – er - cracked yet,
the cybernetic body transfer problem
as you so elegantly did in prose,
but you *appear* happy
and 'at least'
you're not
drinking.

*'A New Palingenesis' (R.D. Milne, *The Argonaut*, 1883)

Roddie McKenzie

Plus ça Change

Professor Vehr's apparatus
transmits matter,
reconstructed on receipt –
and it matters
to those ancient
scholars watching Theseus
sail along
a new channel.

Gavin Cameron

Great Minds Think Alike

(based on the Robert Duncan Milne
short story 'Brain Transference')

Butcher Ben and surgeon Simon
had slipped on ice and banged their heads
they'd ended up in hospital
lying still in adjacent beds.

Empiric Doctor G could see
a brilliant chance to start afresh
combine the microbes from their brains
their daily job's to cut up flesh.

The screens are drawn, the trephine's out
grey matter's swapped from head to head
both men will have enhanced techniques;
such cerebral success, it's said.

back at work

In Ben's shop you'll see on display:
intestine tripe and muscle mince,
pectoral chops, bladder burgers,
if people only knew, they'd wince.

Up-skilled Simon smirks as he hones
his scalpel on a butcher's steel
young Jennifer will taste just grand,
cause he and Ben have struck a deal.

More money to be made, you see
Ben's shop's a human boucherie.

George C. Robertson

Find and Replace

(Suggested by Milne's Eidoloscope invention, where a room's history could be rewound in photographic form, my poem questions the wisdom, should it be possible, of rewinding our life and changing outcomes)

Let's imagine....
Open your mind.... suspend disbelief
What if you could rewind your life

Would you?

If, like Milne's Eidoloscope, some apparatus, drug or procedure
Could make it possible

But not a recording not a facsimile
Your actual life.... rewind

Dare you?

Rewind, pause and delete some unwise or rash decision
And take the road not travelled

Could you?

Press the *FIND AND REPLACE* key
To go in another direction

Worth the risk?

Of meddling with your present situation
With no guarantee of future proofing

Against mucking it up all over again

Anita Petrie

2084

We live in enlightened times, so the politicians insist—
those wielders of verbicide, who turn to mush antique words,
once coined from noble thought.
Their new doctrine forbids unsanctioned touch.
In our tamed world, passions turn to profit.

Oh yes, we live in enlightened times
for our prisons lie near empty, as criminals are processed
and reformed with admirable rapidity.
For that, we have to thank the newly reimagined
Versatile Vertiginous Vacuum.

Reports are profuse, the details veracious:
sent along that crystal bridge between life and death,
body's base matter melts, while the spirit is contained,
preserving the insubstantial but most substantial core.
Dissolution done, the soul must witness its body rebuilt
in new DNA—undamaged, unspoilt, unremarkable.
So grows with Chambord-elegance a frame,
pre-approved of course, guaranteed to allow its
lodger the chance of a blameless life.

And now the politicians claim with all verisimilitude
that they have cured the age-old malady, bane since Abel and Cain.
The soul must still muster itself to be good,
but their machine stands ready to make and renew on demand,
as often as need-be.

But gaze into the black-holed eyes of they who are
cured of their baser instincts.
What remains?
A longing,
for they have seen the other side of the bridge
and they know now their time here is servitude.
Oh, veritably, we live in enlightened times!

Rhoda Neville

The Ghost of Futures Past: to RDM

You've slipped through cracks
In space and time, wider and deeper
Than the San Francisco earthquake's
But earned a place alongside Maxwell,
Bell and Baird as shapers of our Metaverse

Auspicious son of a Cupar manse
Schooled in Genesis and the Classics
You became an Oxford drop-out
Then black shepherd of your family
Ranging Californian outlands

Like one of your own characters, you
Re-invented yourself in the Wild West
Of new ideas, technotopian marvels
In a city, byword for remoteness
But frontier land to the future

Belated Argonaut to its Gold Rush
You rushed ahead in time instead
Staking alternative claims
In territories of things to come

Displaced a hemisphere
From folk and country, you reported
On Globe-shrinking tomorrows.
The Victorian Internet of telegraph cables
Spanned your world, but also laid
The basis of your imagination

It webbed our world with
Sound and moving pictures
Transmitted through the ether,
Populating it with apparitions
Of the living, disembodied doubles
Woven from electrons and desire

In an age of steam and gaslight
You dreamt our world electric
Scientising telepathic mediums
Into coming televisual media
Turning pseudo-psychics into physics
Séance visions into video link-ups,
Satellite telephones and
Panoptic systems of surveillance

Morphing Muybridge into 'Millbank'
Your Palaeoscopic Camera
Replayed stored memories
Stone had photographed
As virtual moving pictures.
Your Eidoloscope revealed
Every buried secret of the past
But also ran the cinematic race
For patents neck-and-neck

Born near Frankensburgh-on-Tay
You modernised the Grandmother
Of your genre's founding myth of
Resurrection through electric forces.
You dreamed of cryogenic afterlives
And medicated immortality, while
Slowly embalming yourself alive
In defiance of the alcoholic gold cure

That fateful night on Market Street
You stumbled headlong into modernity
Cusped on your previewed century
And so into cultural oblivion.
Eclipsed by Stevenson and Doyle,
You've left behind a Milne-shaped hole
That only your own words can now refill

Keith Williams

Epilogue

Now it's your turn to be inspired by the Scientific Muse.
Insert what you channel into the space below:

The Wyvern Poets

Formed in April 2017 and based in Dundee, Wyvern poets meet monthly to share ideas, try out new poems and support one another with problems and revisions. There is an emphasis on pursuing writing and strong encouragement to publish. To this end, noteworthy poets who live in and around Dundee are welcomed on a regular basis to read their poems and discuss their techniques, working habits and approaches to publication.

The group was founded by Roy Canning and takes its name from a suggestion by Roddie McKenzie that the wyvern has a particular relevance to Dundee, being a component on a Dundee Seal of 1900 and appearing in different forms throughout the city.

Members of the group share a passion for having fun with words and experimenting with verse forms, perspectives, tone, imagery and the music of lines. Their interests are diverse and their writing styles individual. Among many other themes, those of loss and change, landscape and land, history, memory, emerging technologies and urban life recur across the poets' work, encompassing the spiritual, the personal, the social and the political aspects of life. Poems are written in both Scots and English and are at times purposefully humorous or meditative or edgy or provocative.

Extremely interested in all things local, Wyverns keenly collaborate with city institutions on different writing projects: Echo at Dundee Contemporary Arts Centre, poetry publication with Friends of Dundee Law and the combined arts project with Dundee Botanic Gardens. There is especial pleasure in collaborating with the University of Dundee to celebrate literary anniversaries as here and previously on James Hogg in 'Confessions 2020' and 'Travels in Scotland: Poems for Walter Scott @250. Similarly, the Wyvern poets have been pleased to participate alongside the University in recent 'Being Human' Festivals: 'Frankenstein Returns', 2018; 'Aquatic City', 2019; 'New Worlds', 2020.

Group members' poems have appeared in The Scotsman, The Courier, The Record, New Writing Scotland, Lallans, Gutter, Dundee Writes, Northwords and Seagate III, as well as on numerous online sites based outside Scotland. Several members enjoy ongoing involvement in the series of monthly Dundee renga curated by Bill Herbert.

Contact details:

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Tweets @wyvernpoets

Wyvern Contributors (and Guest)

Gavin Cameron
Roy Canning
Bet McCallum
Roddie McKenzie
Rhoda Neville
Anita Petrie
Ann Prescott
George C. Robertson

Keith Williams

Biographies

Roy Canning lives in Broughty Ferry and was one of the original co-founders of the Wyvern Poets. He has been published in anthologies, pamphlets and poems written for local cultural events.

Gavin Cameron has been a member of Wyverns since its formation. He also organises the Dundee & Angus region of National Novel Writing Month and runs the Hotchpotch open-mike night for writers.

Peter Marshall has spent his adult life near the River Tay. He enjoys experimenting with various forms of words to convey his observations, especially on nature and on emotions. Bet McCallum lives in Broughty Ferry and London. She has co-authored three books on primary education. Her short stories, brief memoirs and poems have appeared in New Writing Dundee, Gutter, Dundee Writes and Seagate III.

Roddie McKenzie lives in Dundee and has published with the Nethergate Writers since 2006. His poetry and short stories have appeared in Cairn, Lallans, Dundee Writes, Seagate III, Poetry Lab Shanghai, Tether End, Open Mouse, Razur Cuts IX, Writers Cafe Magazine and New Writing Scotland 35, and in the Scottish Book Trust book 'Rebel'.

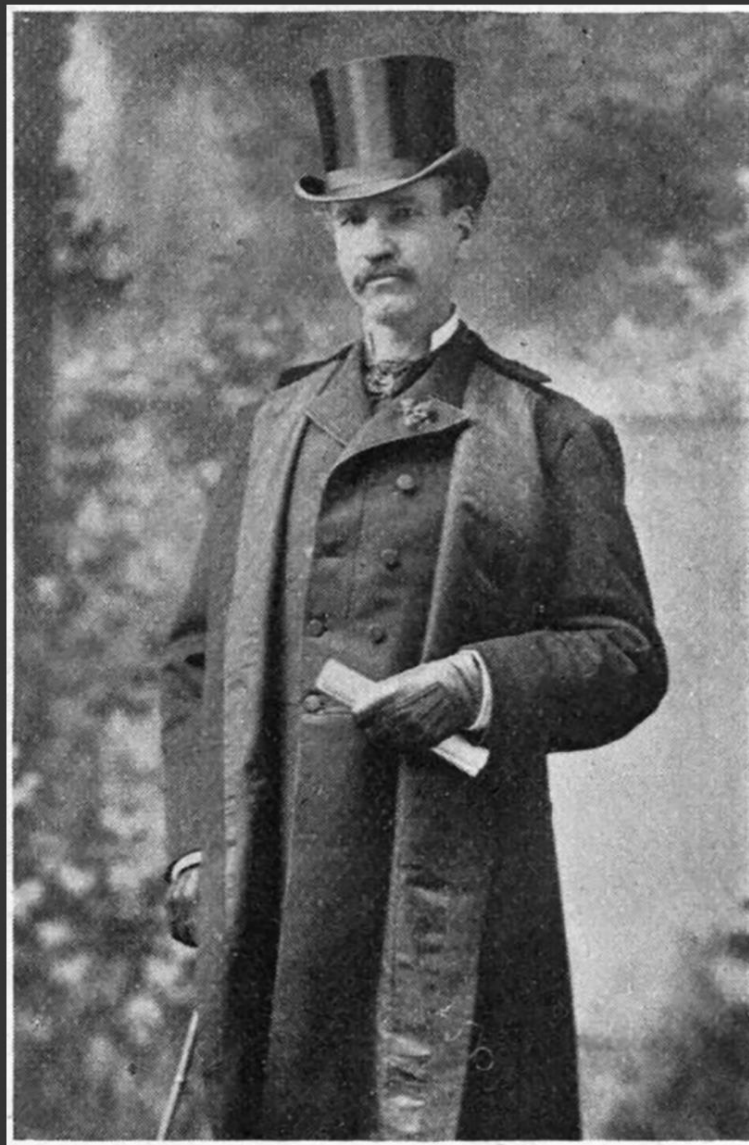
Rhoda Neville recently penned the final lines of her second novel, a ghost story, set near her home by the Tay. She also writes poetry and short stories. In 2020, she won the Constable Silver Stag Award for her first (SF) novel.

Anita Petrie lives in Broughty Ferry. Since retiring, she has become interested in writing poetry. She likes to see the world differently through the lens of poetry and literature.

Ann Prescott comes from the Wirral. She has had short stories and poems published in various anthologies. She writes for fun.

George Robertson resides in Broughty Ferry and has been a member of Wyverns since its inception. He writes in both Scots and English, the vehicle used being the one that best relates to the subject. George has seen his work appear in national and international magazines. He is about to self-publish his third, mainly humorous anthology.

Keith Williams is Reader in English at the University of Dundee. He very much enjoys collaborating with the Wyverns on this series of poetry booklets, marking literary anniversaries and the themes of annual Being Human Festival Programmes.



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